

Large crowds at Waste Pits meetings discuss well water

By Gilbert Hoffman •

HIGHLANDS – Jackie Young, president of the new organization THEA and the San Jacinto River Coalition, held two meetings to update the public on the status of work on the Superfund Waste Pits.

Last Thursday she met with interested parties at the J. D. Walker Community Center in McNair, and this week on Tuesday night she met with the public at the Highlands/San Jacinto Community Center. Each meeting had about 150 attendees, with only a few at both.

Young said that attendees were evenly divided from affected neighborhoods around the Waste Pits, including Channelview, Lynchburg, Highlands, McNair, and Baytown.

Young spent a lot of time on technical and chemical information, explaining to the interested crowd how Harris County tests had discovered possible contamination, even dioxin, in the well water samples it drew in June. She said that Harris County Pollution Control had sampled and tested 100 wells. Of these, 28 had shown to be contaminated, and the well owners had received letters from HCPC telling them “Don’t Drink the Water” until retesting had been completed. Young explained that she understands when the samples were tested, other samples were open nearby, and may have compromised the well water samples.

Harris County is using money from the lawsuit settlement to pay for the testing. Each test, if searched for all contaminants, costs \$2000 and therefore the whole testing program cost \$200,000. This was paid for out of the \$10 million dollars that the county received from the lawsuit. Precinct 2 has said that all the money will be spent on environmental projects within 5 miles of the Waste Pit site. They have not currently decided how the rest of the money will be spent, but there is under study a proposal to provide water and sewer lines in some of the affected areas.

Young explained that even though the lawsuit awarded \$29.2 million to the plaintiffs, including the county, this money cannot be used for individual relief from health problems or well water contamination. These situations must be settled in private lawsuits against the responsible parties, she said.

It was noted that a number of attorneys were present at the meeting, to talk with interested residents that had a claim. These included high-profile firms such as Smith & Hasler, and the Mithoff Law Office.

CONGRESSMAN GREEN CALLS FOR REMOVAL

In a speech on the floor of the House in Washington, Congressman Green called attention to the health problems created by the Waste Pits, and told Congress the only acceptable solution was to remove the contaminated material completely. In part he said “This is no way to live. We need to take the strongest measure available to clean up the site.”

BAYTOWN VOTES FOR REMOVAL

City Council in Baytown last week passed a resolution calling for the full removal of the material in the Waste Pits. They directed their Parks Department to work on this. Young said that many people had asked her for a method to use filtration to make the water safe. She said that reverse osmosis, and most filtration systems, are not satisfactory. Although she could not recommend one, she advised the audience to look into Catalytic High Activated Carbon filters, which have shown some success.

The audience had a number of questions, concerns and opinions.

These included why the letter from the county said bathing in this well water was okay;



Jackie Young presented the facts about the Waste Pits in a slide show, with historical and environmental data. She ended the slides with this humorous cartoon by Nick Anderson of the Houston Chronicle, showing how the Pokemon Go craze could extend to the Waste Pits being a site to search for Pokemon.

What affect hurricanes and floods might have on the integrity of the temporary cap;
Would a barge strike release dioxins;
Why is money allocated for a park north of Lake Houston, so far away;
What is an acceptable level of dioxin in the water (30 picograms per litre).

COMPETING PROPOSALS

Young mentioned that another organization, San Jacinto Citizens Against Pollution, has a website keepitcapped.org, and is against the plan to remove all the contaminated material. Their theory is that the so-called "dig and haul" method exposes and spreads more dioxin than a cap would ever disperse. However, Young says the technique should be cofferdams, drainage of the fill site, and then dry removal of the contaminated material in a safe and proven method.

BUY-OUTS POSSIBLE?

The federal government has used a buy-out program in Banana Bend and Rio Villa to eliminate potential flood properties. The question is whether some type of Buy-Out program would compensate well owners for their potential losses, and health risks. Young had a sign-up sheet at the meeting, to learn who might be interested in this type of program. However, she cautioned that no money is currently available for any type of relief in a buy-out program. She did note that "I've heard that property values are dropping" in affected areas, such as Lynchburg. Audience comments included Sean Matula, who advised well owners to file Freedom Of Information requests with the County to learn what the tests show is in their water; Sam Sledge, who complained about not knowing if his water is safe; and Mr. Hunt, who said that in his opinion the dioxin could never be totally eliminated and would always pose a threat, even if most was removed. The next regular meeting of the San Jacinto River Coalition is scheduled for August 2.